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Doing Resettlement in Neighbourhoods Effected by Conflict

Shane Bell, PhD Student, Queen's University Belfast

Dr Michelle Butler, Lecturer in Criminology, Queen's University Belfast

The conflict in Northern Ireland has affected some neighbourhoods more so than others and individuals from these neighbourhoods tend to be overrepresented in the Northern Ireland Prison System (NIPS). Imprisoned people from these neighbourhoods can be the most challenging to work with, due to the complexity of their needs and high rate of re-offending. This briefing paper outlines some of the specific challenges that can be encountered when undertaking resettlement work with this group. Resettlement refers to the process of working with those in prison to prepare them for their release and reduce their probability of re-offending. This briefing paper is based on research findings emerging from Shane Bell's PhD research, and forthcoming academic publications by Shane Bell and Dr Michelle Butler.

1 Individualised Needs

Individuals from these neighbourhoods often grow up with multiple deprivations and experience trauma and exposure to violence, which they seek to self-medicate by using alcohol and illegal and prescription drugs. They report developing drug or alcohol dependency from an early age, consuming these substances as a coping strategy. As a result, substance misuse problems are common, with individuals using these substances when they experience challenging situations or negative emotions.

In addition, mental health problems and emotional de-sensitisation are commonplace. Many reported being subjected to paramilitary punishment violence due to previous criminal activities, unpaid drug debts or selling drugs without paramilitary approval. Paramilitary punishment violence was described as a routine feature of their lives, with these individuals appearing emotionally de-sensitised to these events and undeterred from re-offending by this violence or criminal justice sanctions, such as imprisonment. These experiences, alongside their substance misuse issues and past histories of trauma, contribute to the development of mental health problems and distorted cognitions. Accordingly, these individuals are: less sensitive to notions of risk, undeterred by formal and informal punishments and disinclined to think about the long-term consequences of their actions.

Other needs demonstrated by these individuals include sensation-seeking, difficulties regulating their emotions, unstable accommodation, unemployment, poor educational histories and low motivation arising from a sense of hopeless inevitability about their life circumstances.

Consequently, when undertaking resettlement work with these individuals, the following issues will need to be considered:

These individuals may be deemed ineligible for many rehabilitative and resettlement programmes due to programme eligibility criteria, excluding those with ongoing mental health problems, problematic behaviour, low motivation and continuous substance misuse issues.

Efforts by practitioners to encourage engagement by presenting a long-term view of how the lives of these individuals could change is unlikely to trigger sustained participation in resettlement programmes, given their short-term thinking and distorted cognitions.

As criminal justice sanctions and paramilitary violence have not deterred these individuals from engaging in criminality, it is possible that others will begin to perceive them as incorrigible and incapable of change, further contributing to their low motivation and sense of inevitability about their circumstances.

Detailed work is required to identify what specific goals may act to motivate these individuals and to understand why paramilitary punishment violence and criminal justice sanctions have not deterred them from criminality. This knowledge can then be used to inform the development of their resettlement plan.

Given the complexity and intensity of their needs, these individuals require intensive support. Successful resettlement is unlikely to be achieved if only short-term assistance is provided or if these individuals are left for weeks in between support meetings, supervisions or programme participation.

Programmes which fail to recognise how environment factors have shaped their individualised needs and offending are also unlikely to succeed. Programmes need to address both the individual and environmental factors contributing to behaviour or progress made within the prison will be undone when individuals are released.

2 Environmental Factors

The legacy of the conflict continues to have a significant effect on these neighbourhoods. Paramilitary organisations persist and exert power over local residents through the use of violence and intimidation. As a result, people growing up in these areas frequently witness violence and intimidation being used as a strategy to control others, problem solve and obtain desired goals. This can contribute to a normalisation of violence and individuals mirroring this use of violence in their own lives. Moreover, as local residents are reluctant to report paramilitary activity to the police for fear of violent paramilitary retaliation, the majority of those in prison from these neighbourhoods are those that have agreed to work for the paramilitaries (perhaps under duress) and/or those whose behaviour has brought them into conflict with paramilitary members. Frequently, paramilitary members will threaten the individual and/or their family with violence if the individual returns to the area or will subject them to further threats, abuse and punishment violence upon their return. Under such circumstances, four scenarios were reported. These included: 1) re-offending in order to obtain money to be able to leave the area and escape paramilitaries, 2) obtaining temporary accommodation in a hostel but being exposed to the anti-social behaviour, crime and drug use of other hostel members, increasing their own probability of

re-offending, 3) coping with the fear of this violence by substance abuse, further increasing their risk of re-offending, and 4) intentionally choosing to re-offend as a means of retaliating against paramilitaries and challenging their attempt to dictate how they should behave. As a result, for many of these individuals, imprisonment was viewed as an 'easy option' as prison was safer, more ordered and predictable than their lives outside of prison.

Public disorder, crime and drug use (both prescription and illegal) are also higher in these neighbourhoods. This creates more opportunities for individuals to become involved in crime and increases the probability that their peer group and/or family members may be engaged in criminality. This adds to the difficulties these individuals will experience desisting from crime on their release from prison. Often people leaving prison rely on their families and friends to provide pro-social support and help to reduce their re-offending but the opportunities for pro-social support will be lessened if family and friends are also involved in criminality.

In addition, these areas witness a high use of prescription medication as people attempt to cope with the trauma of the conflict. The high use of prescription medication in Northern Ireland has helped to create a culture of dependency in these areas, with many viewing the use of prescription drugs as a socially acceptable coping mechanism. All of these factors have contributed to drugs (especially prescription drugs) being easily available in these areas, facilitating substance misuse and criminality.

Marginalisation, stigmatisation and limited employment opportunities are also visible in these neighbourhoods. The conflict fractured the economic infrastructure in these areas, which, combined with the stigma of having been in prison, can result in few employment opportunities being available that can meaningfully engage these individuals or pay sufficiently well to allow them to significantly change their lifestyles.

Accordingly, to increase the probability of resettlement work being successful with these individuals, the following points need to be addressed:

Resettlement work must tackle the environmental factors that can contribute to offending behaviour both prior to and after release from prison. Focusing solely on changing an individual's behaviour, cognitions or emotions (or merely providing services only during imprisonment) will have limited success (if at all) given the challenges these individuals face on their release.

The influence of paramilitaries in these neighbourhoods must be lessened if these individuals are to be able to reduce their own use of violence, crime and substance misuse.

Returning individuals to environments in which crime, violence and substance misuse are common, with few pro-social supports or employment prospects will not reduce their re-offending.

While in prison, efforts should be made to foster a pro-social support network of family and friends so that these individuals can seek the support of this network rather than their anti-social peers upon their release. This may require attempts to repair previous broken relationships or create new relationships with voluntary organisations working in these neighbourhoods.

Furthermore, there is a need to improve mental health services, employment prospects and accommodation options available to these individuals and in their neighbourhoods if their re-offending is to be reduced.

Successful resettlement therefore hinges on a multiagency approach, with re-offending rates measuring not only the success of programmes delivered within prison but also the wider environmental factors contributing to re-offending.

3 Service Provision

Examples of highly motivated service providers attempting to do their best to meet the needs of these individuals was evident. Despite the unique challenges working with this group posed, service providers were committed to trying to improve the life circumstances of these individuals and reduce their re-offending. The most positive aspects of service provision centred on inter-agency working between the voluntary and community sector and State agencies, which this work focused on meeting the immediate needs of these individuals. Unfortunately, however, a number of ideological and practical issues were identified that appeared to hinder resettlement efforts.

Of particular relevance was the ideological philosophy which appeared to underlie resettlement service provision. In many cases, access to resettlement services was based on individuals demonstrating their potential to change and willingness to attempt to reduce their re-offending. Service providers emphasized that change begins when individuals choose to take positive steps away from crime. Yet, the complex needs demonstrated by these individuals, and the environmental factors they faced, meant that they were unable to begin this change process without the assistance of others. Programme eligibility criteria suggested that many of the existing resettlement programmes were ill-suited and/or had insufficient capacity to deal with those demonstrating a multitude of ongoing problems (e.g. dual-diagnosis). The majority of existing resettlement services were therefore not designed to change the behaviour of those with multiple ongoing problems, who frequently relapsed back into problematic behavioural patterns or demonstrated a low motivation to change. Instead, they were mostly designed to support and assist those who were beginning their own journey towards desistance.

The structure, funding and availability of resettlement services also hindered resettlement. Resettlement services were being provided by a range of different organisations, financed by different funders, with different agendas and operating under different timeframes. This fragmentation occasionally resulted in service duplication and often contributed to gaps in service delivery. It also resulted in some groups being prioritised for engagement over others (e.g. those who were sentenced), with the result that those on remand and/or imprisoned for shorter timeframes had less opportunities to avail of resettlement services.

Ongoing fiscal challenges also meant that uncertainty over future funding was common, with service providers expected to 'prove their worth' in order to obtain funding. Depending on the performance measures chosen, this approach may hinder the provision of resettlement services to these individuals. For example, if the performance of resettlement services is solely measured by reducing re-offending rates, research elsewhere has demonstrated how service providers will be more inclined to 'cherry-pick' participants, choosing those who are motivated and more likely to demonstrate change on the performance measures being used compared to those that are not. Likewise, if programme completion rates are used as a measure of performance, service providers are likely to prioritise

programme places to those that are motivated and engaged compared to those with chaotic lifestyles and low motivation, who may be most in need of assistance and present the greatest risk of re-offending. As Northern Ireland moves towards an outcomes-based accountability model, it is important that careful thought is given to what performance measures are used and how this may affect service provision to avoid those with the most complex needs falling through the cracks. It is also necessary to ensure there are sufficient services available to meet demand.

Increasingly, service providers are also being encouraged to work together to provide 'wrap-around' services. While this is desirable, due to the fragmented nature of service provision, barriers to interagency cooperation remain, hindering the effectiveness of resettlement services. For instance, as a greater range of service providers are working in the prison environment, difficulties agreeing information-sharing protocols can result in staff members missing opportunities to intervene and provide a holistic service as they only have an in-complete picture of the behaviour and needs of the people they are working with.

Finally, funding services which only provide a short-term service without a clear plan for how the needs of these individuals will be progressed beyond programme completion are unlikely to result in long-term change given the complex range of individualised needs these individuals demonstrate and the environment factors influencing their behaviour.

As a result, the following points should be considered in relation to service delivery:

Existing service provision needs to be expanded to ensure sufficient services are available which are designed to cope with those who are lacking the personal capacity to initiate change and whose journey towards desistance is likely to be marked by frequent relapses and challenging behaviour.

A review of existing service provision needs to be conducted to identify potential gaps in service provision, service duplication, the programme eligibility criteria used, how individuals are progressed from one service to another and when individuals tend to 'fall through the cracks'. This information should be used to redesign service delivery.

Careful consideration should be given to choosing performance measures that will encourage rather than discourage service providers in delivering services to those with complex needs that can be the most challenging to work with.

Barriers to effective interagency cooperation need to be reduced to promote an efficient, effective and economical delivery of resettlement services, providing a holistic approach to service delivery which addresses both individualised needs and environmental factors.

When conducting the review of existing service provision, how individuals will progress from one service to another should be outlined, ensuring that the progress made is built on and maintained. Referral pathways between the different organisations should be agreed, with each service provider and their funder being clear on what they are delivering and how this fits into the wider resettlement plan.

4 Possible Next Steps

Based on these findings, it is recommended that the following steps are taken to improve resettlement service provision for this specific population:

- Given the diversification of service providers involved in providing resettlement services and/or services that affect resettlement success, it is necessary that barriers to effective interagency cooperation and planning are reduced. In particular, protocols for information-sharing should be agreed and enacted, as well as the clarification of roles and responsibilities of different service providers. Referral systems between service providers should be approved and the length of time between identification of need and access to services should be reduced.
- A review of existing service provision needs to be conducted in order to identify the capacity of existing services to work with individuals presenting with multiple ongoing problems, especially mental health and substance misuse issues. Given the extent of the complex needs demonstrated by these individuals, it is highly likely that existing service provision will need to be expanded and enhanced to be better able to cope with individuals presenting with multiple issues simultaneously and who have not yet demonstrated a readiness to change. More services designed to motivate and engage individuals who express a low motivation may also be required as well as more intensive support services.
- Resettlement services are unlikely to be successful unless both the person's individualised needs and the environmental factors contributing to their offending behaviour are addressed. This will require an interagency approach and providing services that follow individuals as they are released from prison back into the community. While programmes provided in prison can be beneficial and help individuals develop skills that can be used to reduce re-offending, these programmes are unlikely to reduce re-offending if individuals are homeless, unemployed, lack access to appropriate health services and are marginalised in the community after their release.
- If individuals have pro-social support networks, resettlement services should seek to work with these networks to engage, motivate and help individuals recover from relapses. If the individual does not have a pre-existing pro-social support network, resettlement services should seek to help the individual to develop such a network.
- The legacy of the conflict in these neighbourhoods must also be addressed. This involves tackling the presence of paramilitaries, drugs and violence, as well as the use of prescription medication and substance misuse to cope with trauma. For instance, initiatives undertaken in prison to reduce the use of prescription medicine will have little impact on re-offending if prescription medication can be easily obtained in the community on release.
- As Northern Ireland moves towards an outcomes-based model of accountability, careful thought needs to be given to what performance measures will be used to evaluate resettlement services. Northern Ireland should take on board the lessons learnt from other jurisdictions which demonstrate how focusing solely on measures such as reducing re-offending rates can have the unintended consequence of reducing service provision to those with the most complex needs, who are most in need of support and assistance and most likely to re-offend.
- Finally, there is also a need to challenge the rhetoric that harsher sanctions will reduce re-offending. If paramilitary punishment violence has not deterred these individuals from re-offending, it is highly unlikely that harsh prison conditions or longer prison sentences will do so. Only by addressing their individualised needs and the environmental factors contributing to offending will their probability of engaging in future crime be reduced.